

Full-day K: Best possible way to spend on schools?

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Kindergartners listen to stories about farm animals in May at Garfield Elementary School in Olympia. STAFF FILE

Universal full-day kindergarten is one of the sacred cows of public education. School officials and lawmakers talk as if its cost-effectiveness is beyond question.

The Washington Supreme Court — taking its lead from a 2009 legislative policy — includes full-day kindergarten among the fundamentals of basic education that lawmakers must fully fund by 2018.

But what if full-day kindergarten for all children isn't the most rational place to invest scarce school money — money that might otherwise be spent, say, on early childhood education, smaller class sizes or teacher salaries?

What if the full-day option were instead targeted at the 5-year-olds least prepared for school, and the rest of the money was shifted to other priorities?

Intuitively, the value of doubling kindergarten time seems inarguable. Aside from value, it's wildly popular among parents who would otherwise pay for day care.

But the Legislature's research service recently delivered a contrarian message: The evidence doesn't appear to support the sweeping claims for full-day's effectiveness.

At the Legislature's behest, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy has been pulling together and evaluating studies of full-day kindergarten. It has examined the most rigorous studies comparing full-day with half-day kindergarten.

The conclusion: “Full-day kindergarten leads to higher standardized test scores than half-day programs, but this effect appears to fade out within a few years.” Surprisingly, WSIPP reported the same fadeout among low-income students, a group that seems likely to benefit from any extra help at that age.

WSIPP added an important caveat: It had found no way to measure whether full-day leaves kids with lasting social or emotional advantages. But based on the best information available, it found that the estimated \$2,650 extra it takes to bump a student from half-day to full-day is unlikely to pay off in the long run.

The report at least should raise doubts about the orthodox position on kindergarten.

It also should pose questions to the Washington Supreme Court: Will basic education in 2018 necessarily look like what lawmakers thought it would look like in 2009? Is the court getting overly attached to aging spending formulas for particular components of public education?

It’s possible that funding full-day kindergarten for 100 percent of Washington’s students is the best possible use of hundreds of millions in education dollars. It also is possible that it’s not. The issue is at least worth a conversation.

Read more here: <http://www.thenewstribune.com/2014/02/02/3024684/full-day-k-best-possible-way-to.html#storylink=cpy>